NEW YORK TIMES
30 JANUARY 1983

Vatican Aide Hints Pope Wrote Letter to Brezhnev

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Special to The New York Times

ROME, Jan. 29 — A senior Vatican official today repeated a denial that Pope John Paul II had written Leonid I. Brezhnev threatening to return to Poland to lead a resistance movement in the event of a Soviet invasion.

But the official hinted that the Pope did write a letter to the Soviet leader, who died last November, presumably to express his concern over the possibility of Soviet action in Poland in the winter of 1981 and 1982. At that time tension was high over the possibility of Soviet moves to curb the independent labor movement Solidarity.

Senator Alfonse D'Amato, Republican of New York, said last month that he had been reliably informed by a Vatican source that the Pope had threatened to lead a resistance movement in his native Poland in the event of a Soviet invasion.

Such a letter has been cited as a possible reason to connect the K.G.B., the Soviet intelligence agency, to the reported involvement of the Bulgarian secret service in the attempted assassination of the Pope by a Turkish citizen on May 13, 1981.

The Vatican, both officially and in private conversations, continues to make no comment on the continuing investigation in Italy of reports that Bulgarian agents instigated Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turkish gunman convicted of shooting the Pope. The official said the Vatican had no information beyond the public knowledge of the arrest of Sergei Ivanov Antonov, a Bulgarian airline official here, on suspicion of complicity.

Relations between the Vatican and Moscow have entered a period of tension, possibly heightened by the reports of a Bulgarian role in the plot on the Pope's life. Last month, for the first time since the 1950's, the Soviet Union,

through Tass, its official press agency, strongly attacked the Pope.

The Vatican official said that, more than the present furor over Bulgaria, Moscow is edgy about the Pope because of the firmness with which he, as a Pole who lived most of his life under a Soviet-backed regime, has made his critical views of Communism a central theme of his papacy.

In that connection it is noted here that of the 18 cardinals that the Pope named this month and will consecrate next Wednesday one lives in the Soviet Union, two in Soviet-dominated European countries, one in Yugoslavia, a Communist country not in the Soviet camp, and a fifth in Angola, which has a Marxist Government and close Soviet ties.

The elevation of Bishop Julijans Vaivods, an 87-year-old Latvian, to become the first known cardinal in the Soviet Union is viewed by Vatican sources as a daring move to assert Roman Catholic rights in that country, but also a step tempered by being less challenging to Moscow than might have been the nomination of a cardinal in the neighboring Soviet republic of Lithuania.

This is so because Catholics are a minority in Latvia and their faith has not been, like in Lithuania, a force that is seen both by the Lithuanians and the Soviet authorities as a movement of opposition to the Soviet annexation of the country during World War II.

Of the 3.5 million Lithuanians, more than 80 percent are Catholics, and

To have named a cardinal in Lithuania, according to a view heard in the Vatican, would have been seen by the Soviet Union as a direct challenge. The Vatican considers it an important step forward in its relations with Moscow over Lithuania that last year the Soviet Union offered no opposition to the nomination of a Lithuanian bishop and the return to his diocese after 23 years of exile of a bishop who, although named in 1957, had never been allowed to exercise his functions.

On the other hand, the Vatican is deeply concerned over the fact that, less than a week before the consecration of the first Soviet cardinal, Moscow announced that it had started legal proceedings against a Lithuanian priest, the Rev. Alfonsas Svarinskas. It accused the priest of "antistate activities" and inciting Catholics to revolt against the Soviet Union.